

Rural Non-congregate Summer Meals: How to enhance the program for families

**RESOURCE FOR SPONSORS AND OUTREACH PARTNERS —
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2025 NO KID
HUNGRY CAREGIVER SURVEY**

METHODOLOGY

In December 2025 and January 2026, No Kid Hungry surveyed 1,248 caregivers living near open rural non-congregate summer meals sites, including 654 families who participated in 2025 and 594 families who did not. The survey was available in English and Spanish, and results are weighted to represent households near these sites nationally. The findings below highlight opportunities for sponsors to make rural non-congregate summer meals more accessible and responsive to families' needs.



WHAT FAMILIES TOLD US: PRACTICAL WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PROGRAM

What families told us:

29% of families who participated less than they needed said they learned about the program too late in the summer. Among families who did not participate at all, **68%** had never heard of the program.

Get The Word Out Early And Often

1. START OUTREACH BEFORE SUMMER

What you can do:

- Send backpack flyers and end-of-school communications before summer begins.
- Start promoting your program and the site finder in May.
- Post on social media regularly throughout the summer rather than only when the program launches.
- Consider a post before each distribution or a short live video on distribution day to keep the program visible.
- Use every communication channel available to you and repeat key information throughout the summer.

Learn more: [No Kid Hungry Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#)

2. PUT PROGRAM DETAILS, SCHEDULES AND MENUS ONLINE IN ADVANCE

What families told us:

69% of caregivers said having program details online would improve their experience, and 67% said the same about seeing menus in advance.

What you can do: Create a simple webpage or social media post with the information families need to plan:

- Dates and times
- Locations
- How pickup works
- What meals or foods will be available
- The week's menu, when available
- Keep this information current and easy to find.

3. TURN FAMILIES INTO PROGRAM AMBASSADORS

What families told us:

32% of participating households joined because family or friends spoke positively about the program.

What you can do:

- Support the word-of-mouth that is already helping families find the program. Consider recruiting parent champions, collecting short testimonials, and creating simple social media content that families can easily share.

4. MAKE IT CLEAR THAT MEALS ARE FREE AND AVAILABLE TO ELIGIBLE CHILDREN

What families told us:

Among families who knew about the program but didn't use it, **41%** believed other families needed the meals more and **23%** weren't sure whether they were eligible.

What you can do: Say directly in your outreach materials that meals are free of cost. Use clear, consistent language about who can receive meals at your site, and address common eligibility questions before families arrive.



Making The Program Easier To Use

5. OFFER PICKUP TIMES THAT WORK FOR FAMILIES

What families told us:

27% of families who participated less than they needed said schedule conflicts kept them from using the program as much as they needed. **34%** of participating households said early morning or late afternoon pickup options would improve their experience a lot.

What you can do:

- Add an early morning or evening pickup option when feasible.
- Ask families which times work best before setting or changing your schedule.
- Look at participation patterns to identify when families are most likely to be available.



6. REDUCE ACCESS BARRIERS

What families told us:

Among families who participated less than they needed and had trouble reaching a site, **62%** cited distance, **52%** cited unreliable transportation, and **49%** did not have a car.

Among non-participating households who said they would be open to participating in 2026, **45%** preferred home delivery.

What you can do:

- Ask families, principals, counselors, and other community partners what is getting in the way of participation.
- Consider additional grab-and-go locations, mobile stops, or home delivery.
- If offering delivery, explore whether it makes sense to operate it in-house or work with a third-party partner.
- Consider multi-day distribution to reduce the number of trips families need to make.
- Even a short survey or single focus group can help identify barriers and potential solutions.

LEARN MORE:

[Savor the Summer: Designing Menus with Community Flavor | No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices](#)

[High-Impact Meals: Innovative Logistics for Consistent Summer Food Access | No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices](#)



Improve The Food Experience

7. PRIORITIZE FRESH PRODUCE, TASTE AND APPEARANCE

What families told us:

41% of families said more fresh produce would improve their experience a lot, followed by 38% who said better taste and 37% who said better appearance.

What can you do:

- Build expectations for fresh produce into vendor agreements rather than negotiating amounts meal by meal.
- Review how food looks and tastes from a family's perspective, not just whether it meets program requirements.
- Use caregiver feedback to identify menu items that families enjoy and those that are less successful.

8. OFFER BULK INGREDIENTS FAMILIES CAN USE AT HOME

What families told us:

70% of likely 2026 participants said they would prefer ingredients to prepare at home over prepared meals.

What you can do:

- Where your model allows, offer bulk ingredients such as a loaf of bread, a head of lettuce, or a bag of rice.
- When feasible, offer families choices that fit their household, such as a fresh box or a shelf-stable box.
- Pair bulk foods with simple preparation ideas so families know how to use them.



Make Meals Easier To Carry And Easy To Use At Home

9. IMPROVE THE PICKUP EXPERIENCE AND PACKAGING

What families told us:

34% said meals that are easy to carry and take home would improve their experience a lot, and **30%** said shorter wait times would help a lot.

What you can do:

- Add stations at drive-through sites to keep the line moving.
- Consider pickup windows or other approaches that reduce waiting.
- If families are walking to the site, provide bags or boxes that are sturdy and comfortable to carry.
- Think about packaging from the perspective of families who need to transport food home without a car.



10. HELP FAMILIES KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE FOOD

What families told us:

32% of families said preparation instructions would improve their experience a lot, and **30%** said the same about nutrition information.

What you can do:

- Pair meals and bulk food distributions with simple preparation instructions and recipe ideas.
- Share information through multiple channels, including social media, videos, websites, and newsletters.
- Don't rely only on printed inserts. Families may be more likely to notice and use information when it is shared in multiple ways.

Ask Families What They Think

11. BUILD A SIMPLE, LOW-EFFORT FEEDBACK LOOP

What families told us:

32% of participating households said opportunities to share their opinions would improve their experience a lot.

What you can do:

- Start with a low-effort feedback option, such as a QR code survey at pickup or a comment card.
- Ask a few focused questions about what is working, what is difficult, and what families would change.
- Most importantly, close the loop. Tell families what you heard and what you changed as a result.
- Looking for feedback survey templates? Visit the [No Kid Hungry resource](#) on co-creating non-congregate summer meals with your community.

